



File Code: 1950
Date: April 7, 2021

RE: Pomeroy Maintenance Non-Commercial Thinning and Prescribed Fire – Phase 1

Dear Friends of the Umatilla National Forest,

I invite you to share your comments on the proposed Pomeroy Maintenance Non-Commercial Thinning and Prescribed Fire – Phase 1 project. The goal of this project is to maintain and restore vegetation characteristics associated with historical fire regimes common to the northern Blue Mountains and representative in the project area. The proposal does not include cutting trees that are of age for commercial timber harvest.

Looking to the Future

This project is the first phase of several to be proposed on the Pomeroy Ranger District with similar forest management or wildfire history in need of fuels reduction and forest health management. Treating at the landscape/multiple watershed scale would promote long-term ecological sustainability. These next phases are currently in development to address specific management needs in the selected landscapes/multiple watersheds.

Location

The Phase I project area is 26,570 acres and located approximately 12 miles south of Pomeroy Washington, between the Tucannon River and Forest Service Road 40, as shown in the attached maps.

- Counties: Columbia and Garfield Counties, Washington.
- Legal Description: T. 9 N., R. 41 E., sec. 1-2, 11-15, 21-30, and 32-36; T. 9 N., R. 42 E., sec. 4-9, 16-20, and 29-32; T. 8 N., R. 41 E., sec. 1-5, and 11-12; T. 8 N., R. 42 E., sec. 5-9, 15-18, 21-23, and 26-27.
- Watersheds: Little Tucannon River-Tucannon River; Headwaters Tucannon River; North Fork Asotin Creek; Cummings Creek; Tualum Creek; and Headwaters Pataha Creek.
- Elevation Range: 3,000 – 6,000 feet.

Background and Context

Most of the area proposed for management treatment was burned in the 2005 School Fire or the 2006 Columbia Complex Fire. After the fires, several of the stands with standing burned trees were salvage harvested and planted with conifers. Today, the plantations have grown-in and are competing with encroaching brush or have tree species not typical in areas that would have historically been maintained by managed fire.



Proposed Action

The project would thin small-sized trees and introduce prescribed fire in the landscape to address the following issues: 1) reduce the density of small diameter conifers and allow for more growth for individual trees, 2) reduce brush in areas historically dominated by trees, and 3) reduce the amount of ground and ladder fuels that have accumulated.

Initial implementation of non-commercial thinning is expected to be accomplished within 2 years of project authorization; prescribed burning within 5-10 years. Treatments would be repeated in a 5-10 year rotation, or as needed, to maintain the desired ecological conditions.

Non-Commercial Thinning

Thinning improves growth and vigor of remaining trees and reduces the accumulation of ladder fuels that can spread fire. Treatments proposed under this project include hand thinning (chainsaw) of 4,862 acres and mechanical thinning of 3,071 acres in plantation-like and multi-story forested stands that contain ponderosa pine, Douglas-fir, and/or grand fir. Conifer trees 9 inches in diameter and less would be cut to densities that resemble historic stocking levels. Healthy western white pine would not be cut. Ponderosa pine, western larch, and Douglas fir on both dry and moist forest sites would be left on site. If none of the preferred species exist, the healthiest trees relative to the required tree spacing would be left. Ground fuel mastication and/or piling may occur in areas where down woody fuel exceeds Umatilla National Forest Plan Standards and Guidelines. Mastication is a mechanical treatment where a machine shreds, grinds, or chips live and dead standing trees and shrubs, as well as down woody surface fuels. This type of treatment breaks up larger fuels into smaller, irregularly sized particles.

Hand thinning may include hand piling and burning of hand piles in areas where heavy down woody fuels would contribute to an existing fire hazard. Most of these units are in areas that were not harvested during School Fire Salvage Sale.

Hand thinning outside of designated stream buffers in designated RHCAs (Riparian Habitat Conservation Areas) would be conducted in accordance with the *Blue Mountains Project Design Criteria II Biological Assessment*.

Prescribed Burning

Prescribed burning is proposed on approximately 19,406 acres to reduce natural fuel build-up, improve plant vigor, and promote vegetation characteristics that would be expected to occur naturally in this ecosystem. Areas proposed for prescribed fire are mostly dry forest that experienced prescribed fire and/or wildfire as far back as the 1960s, with the latest fire being the 2006 Columbia Complex Fire. Prescribed fire would be implemented mainly in areas dominated by grass and brush. Some of the thinned stands would also be burned, but treatment may be delayed for several years for the residual trees to get to a diameter to survive prescribed fire.

Umatilla National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan

All treatment activities will be designed and implemented in conformance with the 1990 Umatilla National Forest Land & Resource Management Plan's forest-wide standards and guidelines for the Management Areas within the project area: *A1-Non-Motorized Dispersed Recreation*, *A3-Viewshed 1*, *A4-Viewshed 2*, *A6-Developed Recreation*, *A9-Special Interest Area*,

C1-Dedicated Old Growth Forest Habitat, C3-Big Game Winter Range, C4-Wildlife Habitat, C5-Riparian/Wildlife Habitat, C8-Grass Tree Mosaic, E2-Timber/Big Game.

Resource protection measures and standard operating procedures such as the application of Best Management Practices will be used to minimize or eliminate potential environmental effects.

Use of Categorical Exclusion

Preliminary analysis indicates the project fits into the following category and may be excluded from documentation in an environmental impact statement (EIS) or environmental assessment (EA):

"Timber stand and/or wildlife habitat improvement activities that do not include the use of herbicides or do not require more than 1 mile of low standard road construction."
(36CFR 220.6(e)(6))

This project includes routine activities in areas where treatments occurred previously, and the effects and cumulative effects are well known. I do not anticipate extraordinary circumstances that may result in a significant individual or cumulative effect on the quality of the human environment. Resource conditions considered in determining whether extraordinary circumstances related to a proposed action warrant further analysis and documentation in an EA or an EIS are:

- (i) Federally listed threatened or endangered species or designated critical habitat, species proposed for Federal listing or proposed critical habitat, or Forest Service sensitive species;
- (ii) Flood plains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds;
- (iii) Congressionally designated areas, such as wilderness, wilderness study areas, or national recreation areas;
- (iv) Inventoried roadless area or potential wilderness area;
- (v) Research natural areas;
- (vi) American Indians and Alaska Native religious or cultural sites; and
- (vii) Archaeological sites, or historic properties or areas.

The mere presence of one or more of these resource conditions does not preclude use of a categorical exclusion. It is the existence of a cause-effect relationship between a proposed action and the potential effect on these resource conditions, and if such a relationship exists, the degree of the potential effect of a proposed action on these resource conditions that determines whether extraordinary circumstances exist (36 CFR 220.6b).

Comments

I welcome your comments on this project. Comments are most helpful when they identify specific issues and suggest specific project alternatives that would satisfy the need for the proposed action. Written comments should be submitted by mail to Susan Piper, District Ranger, 71 West Main St, Pomeroy, WA 99347, or by email at susan.piper@usda.gov. Please also send a copy to Alison Arnold, Pomeroy District Environmental Coordinator at alison.arnold@usda.gov. Comments must be received no later than Friday, April 23, 2021.

Project documents will be posted to the project webpage at <https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=57189>. If you have any questions or need additional

information, please feel free to contact project lead and Fire Management Officer Tara Mackleit at tara.hanger@usda.gov or 509-843-4676, or Environmental Coordinator Alison Arnold at alison.arnold@usda.gov or 509-843-4626. I thank you for your interest in activities and projects on the Pomeroy Ranger District.

Sincerely,



Susan Piper
District Ranger

Attached: Project Maps
Management Areas, Project Area, Treatment RHCA, Treatment Units, Vicinity

Cc:
Tara Mackleit, Alison Arnold